

Obituaries

Steve Dunleavy, Murdoch's go-to tabloid reporter, dies at 81

By Marc Fisher

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Steve Dunleavy would have loved it: “Hard-drinking” and “hard-hitting” were the first adjectives in the obituaries the New York tabloids published about the city’s prototypical swashbuckling street reporter.

Mr. Dunleavy, who died June 24 at 81, spent more than half a century crafting his character — the brash, rules-breaking, hard-nosed storyteller who was a friend to the cops, an enemy of crooks and bosses, and a voice of the underdog. From his first newspapers in his native Australia to the New York Post and on early tabloid TV shows “The Reporters” and “A Current Affair,” he’d do anything to get a story — write a check, pretend to be someone else, even slash his father’s tires.

Other reporters might express horror at his unethical tactics and purple prose, but they often admired his drive, panache and long string of scoops.

Mr. Dunleavy was a dandy with a two-inch-high pompadour who chain-smoked Marlboro Lights and brought a particularly bloody brand of sensationalism to New York’s tabloid newspapers and to American TV. He proudly paid \$125,000 for an exclusive from Elvis Presley’s bodyguards about the singer’s drug use — an ethics no-no in most U.S. newsrooms. He took sides in battles most journalists would observe from a distance. He said he was “[not a great respecter of ‘off the record.’](#)” He named his column in the Star tabloid, “The Man They Call Mr. Blood and Guts.”

Covering a story in Miami, he spent a long night with detectives working a home-invasion robbery case, plying the cops with Buds at a sleazy bar. As he left, Mr. Dunleavy called out to his sources, “Anything goes tonight, give us a ring. We’ll be there like a rat up a drainpipe.” He really talked like that.

He wrote like that, too. Homicides were “bloody carnage,” crooks were full of “blackhearted evilry.” The New York Times once called his work “nothing short of vile,” asking, “What kind of people do we want to be?”

Mr. Dunleavy’s response was to proudly call his approach “sensational.” He said he became a reporter not to right wrongs, but because it was a hell of a life.

Mr. Dunleavy’s death, at his home on New York’s Long Island, was confirmed by his son, Sean, who said the cause was not known.

“Steve Dunleavy was one of the greatest reporters of all time,” Rupert Murdoch, Mr. Dunleavy’s employer for most of his career, said in a statement. “Whether competing with his own father in the famous Sydney, Australia tabloid wars or over the last 40 years in New York, Steve’s life is littered with good scoops. . . . His passing is the end of a great era.”

Many would argue that it is anything but — that Mr. Dunleavy's career marked the beginning, not the end, of a period of sensationalism and politically skewed pop journalism that helped polarize the country.

He had a host of hates and he plastered them all over his stories. He couldn't stand gays, communists, liberals, unions, Kennedys, health nuts, squeegee men, bean counters and bosses not named Murdoch. In his last years in the business, some of his fellow reporters called him out for using racial slurs to describe his colleagues.

Mr. Dunleavy dismissed such criticism blithely. "Don't tell me about integrity," he once told Rolling Stone. "How many notches you got in your gun? . . . I kinda like to think of myself as a very middle-class kinda guy who feels strongly that the middle class is being pissed all over by the elite of government in both parties and by the elite monster called bureaucracy."

Mr. Dunleavy was Murdoch's frontline fighter, the first to be deployed whenever the man he called The Boss jumped into some new journalism venture, from the New York Post to the National Star supermarket paper to Fox's first tabloid TV shows.

Whether he was toiling as the Post's city editor, in a room that Rolling Stone described as looking like "the inside of an ashtray," or roaming the world for one of Murdoch's Fox TV shows, Mr. Dunleavy always aimed at the jugular. He often delivered.

In the eternal quest for scoops, he plied cops with drinks, switchboard operators with flowers, and pimps and punks with cash. He scored an all-night interview with Cuban President Fidel Castro, claiming that the two got stinking drunk on mojitos. He won exclusives with Mafia boss John Gotti and the women who spent the evening with Sen. Ted Kennedy on Chappaquiddick Island in 1969 the night before Kennedy's companion drowned.

Born in Sydney on Jan. 21, 1938, Stephen Francis Patrick Aloysius Dunleavy came from a family of newspapermen. At age 14, he became a copy boy at the Sydney Sun, the paper where his father was a photographer. By 16, he'd switched to a competing paper to escape accusations that he was benefiting from favoritism.

During that time, he was up against his father on a story about missing hikers. According to many who heard the oft-told tale, to prevent his competitor from getting the story, Mr. Dunleavy slashed his father's car tires. He later claimed, with a wink, that he hadn't known the car belonged to his father.

Chasing actress Ava Gardner in Sydney for a story, Mr. Dunleavy wouldn't take no for an answer. Gardner threw a glass of champagne at his face. Mr. Dunleavy's story the next day started like this: "Last night, I shared a glass of champagne with Ava Gardner. She threw it; I wore it."

He wanted to work on Fleet Street, in one of London's legendary newsrooms. To get there, he did stints at papers in Manila, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Madrid and finally London, where he wrote for United Press International. In 1966, he landed in New York, where he found work as U.S. correspondent for Murdoch's Australian papers, beginning a relationship that lasted until his retirement in 2008.

In 1977, soon after Murdoch took over the Post, the Son of Sam serial killings introduced New York to a lurid style of reporting that hadn't been in vogue in American journalism since the turn of the century. As the Post's point man

on the story, Mr. Dunleavy managed to connect with the parents of some victims, becoming their mouthpiece and their protector, shoving TV cameramen away from them even as he scored one exclusive after another, in one case by posing as a bereavement counselor to interview a victim's relative.

He wasn't shy about touting his access to the victims' parents: "For 13½ hours a Post reporter stood at the side of four courageous people in a painful and often stirring vigil," he wrote, "praying, talking about God and swearing at an unknown madman who has launched a guerilla war against the young and beautiful of this city."

Mr. Dunleavy [spent years defending](#) the white New York police officers who were convicted in the sexual assault of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, in a police station bathroom in 1997.

In 1994, film director Oliver Stone said he used Mr. Dunleavy as the model for the evil reporter in "Natural Born Killers."

Mr. Dunleavy's first wife, Yvonne Dunleavy, reportedly was the ghost writer of "The Happy Hooker," a 1971 best-selling memoir by Xaviera Hollander. Survivors include his wife, Gloria; and two sons.

Of all his antics and excesses, Mr. Dunleavy was proudest of the tricks he pulled to get exclusive stories. In 1987, when television evangelist Jim Bakker was forced to resign from his PTL ministry after revelations of his affair with Jessica Hahn, a former church secretary, ABC's "Nightline" announced that it would broadcast the first interview with Hahn.

Mr. Dunleavy, eager to get the interview first, raced to Hahn's suburban New York hideout and banged on the door. Hahn wouldn't answer, but when the ABC limo showed up to take her to the city for the interview, Mr. Dunleavy posed as her representative and told the driver she was ill and couldn't do the show. The driver, no fool, went to Hahn's downstairs neighbor's place to check out the story. Mr. Dunleavy had seen that coming and arranged for the neighbor to back up his tale.

The ABC driver left without his passenger. Mr. Dunleavy got his exclusive.

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Marc Fisher, a senior editor, writes about most anything. He has been The Washington Post's enterprise editor, local columnist and Berlin bureau chief, and he has covered politics, education, pop culture and much else in three decades on the Metro, Style, National and Foreign desks. Follow 
